

Custom woodworkers go with the grain

By Kate Carter

When Glen Waller saw old wooden dam gates lying on top of a burn pile, there was no way he would let them go up in flames. The gates were from the Lamoille River dam in Morrisville, Vt., and the time had come to replace them with new metal gates. Even though they had been relegated to the excavator's burn pile, Waller knew they had value and that someday he'd find a use for them. He salvaged the dam gates and stashed them in a storage unit, along with other slabs of wood he'd similarly reclaimed. Five years later, the center-cut oak gates found a new purpose as the front door to a custom home Sisler Builders was constructing.

"To take a rough old piece of wood and create a work of art out of it is gratifying," says Seth Allen, Waller's co-worker. "Getting to know clients and bringing their visions to fruition is also satisfying."

Waller and Allen make up the core of Sisler Builders' custom woodworking division, and they often have the opportunity to repurpose old wood. Both love antique and freshly harvested wood and the challenges that come with creating unique custom furniture and fixtures. Not all their projects are created from reclaimed wood. Some are made from unusual wood harvested from around the world. It all depends on what the customer wants.



Glen Waller lines up a door's corner joint, while Seth Allen sands a vanity.

Allen was hired in early 2012 as a carpenter and soon moved into the wood shop to build furniture for Sisler Builders' clients. Shortly after, Waller was brought on to help collaborate on a large order of custom furniture that included three separate pieces—an architecturally

designed, high-end walnut master bed with AV cabinets, drawers, and an oversized headboard; a claro walnut (*Juglans hindsii*) coffee table; and a black walnut (*Juglans californica*) dining room table. Sisler Builders' custom woodworking division was launched!

"We are not set up for high volume," notes Waller. "We do specialty things, such as master vanities, full kitchens with

interiors made of poplar, not plywood, for non-toxic houses, built-in cabinets, and furniture."

The woodworking shop is modest, completely kitted out with Powermatic tools. The only element that is off-

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site is a spray room. “We do mostly natural oil finishes. A lot of present-day finishing systems only require one or two coats, so we rarely need a spray room,” Waller adds.

Waller and Allen both became interested in woodworking when they were kids. Waller’s father was an aerospace engineer with a woodworking shop at home. This in itself was enough to inspire young Waller to take woodworking classes throughout his school years. He also enjoys metal fabrication. He moved to Vermont from California, and prior to joining Sisler Builders owned a custom door-making business in Moscow, Vermont.

Allen modestly claims he



Seth Allen fine-tuning a vanity.

received his own training from the school of hard knocks, but he also attended Vermont Technical College’s architectural design and engineering program, as well as wooden boat school. After graduating from high school he worked for a high-end construction company in Southern Vermont, where he built homes from the ground up, getting involved in all aspects of building.

Allen later moved to NYC to chase his girlfriend, who he eventually married. “I didn’t want to build houses and lug tools, so I

From dam gates to front door

The center-cut oak dam gates Waller salvaged from a burn pile are now the spectacular front door to a custom home by Sisler Builders. The dam gates were submerged for about 80 years and look as though they’d been sandblasted by the volume of water sloshing against them. They’ve also been naturally ebonized by the reaction of the steel I-beams and rods that held the gates together, with the natural tannins in the wood. Waller removed I-beams and other fixtures before storing the gates for five years.



Cushman Design Group of Stowe, who designed the house, also designed the door. “We like working with creative designers and architects like Cushman. They create the designs and the vision, they give us the leeway to design-build as we see fit, as long as their overall vision comes to fruition.

It took Waller and Allen over 600 hours to reclaim the oak dam gates and give them their new life. The client had wanted a unique front door, and is overjoyed with the end result.

started working in wood shops in New York City and that is where my love for furniture and woodshops began,” says Allen. Woodworking also runs in his family. His father owned a construction business and his father-in-law is Johannes Michelsen, a world-renown wood turner known for his amazing wooden hats (woodhat.com).

Most of the custom woodworking projects come from Sisler Builder clients who are having new houses built or major renovations done. “Our clients don’t usually want to stick with a set design. They want the flexibility to make changes along the way,” Allen explains. This gives Sisler Builders the ability to achieve anything their clients dream up. So instead of contracting out furniture and custom projects, he and Waller do the custom work in house.

“We get some interesting projects,” says Waller. “We recently did an outdoor bench that can be raised and lowered, according to snow depth, using a marriage of steel and wood to create a gear mechanism that is operated manually with a hand crank.” Waller was able to employ his metal fabricating skills to design the gearing.

Other creative projects the two have completed are a suspended outdoor shower enclosure made from a reclaimed hot tub, a shuffle board table, a bamboo-cladded front door assembly, and a custom live-edge Douglas fir bench.

“We can do almost anything custom,” says Waller. “If we can’t do some aspects of a the project we will find someone we respect who can, but for the most part we do everything in house.”

Coast to coast on a vintage Harley

By Richard Duda

In September, 2014, I had the honor of taking part in the Motorcycle Cannonball, a coast-to-coast race for antique motorcycles. The ride began in 2010 and runs every other year. The route—3,938 miles from Daytona to Tacoma—is mostly back roads and takes 17 days to complete, including a rest day in Kansas.

The year I rode there were 102 riders; 25 were from foreign countries, 4 were women, and one was a sidecar with husband and wife. The rules are fairly simple. Bikes are divided into three classes, based on motor size. Riders have to leave the start every morning by a certain time, and finish the day within a specified time.

For this race I had decided to build a 1924 Henderson, and started working on it 16 months ahead of time. I finished the day before shipping it to the start in Daytona, but

about 12 years. It is my daily rider and an old friend.

I teamed up with another old friend, Dan Emerson, from Connecticut. We bought a 1988 Ford van as our chase vehicle and loaded it with bikes, spare parts, gear, and clothing. Dan and his wife, Karen, drove it to Daytona. I flew down, and once there had two days to get my Harley ready.

During the day, riders were on their own. We could help each other or get help from someone along the way, but nothing from our crew. On the sixth day, 30 miles from the start, I lost my rear brake at a stop sign in the middle of farm coun-

try. Within five minutes a farmer stopped and asked if he could help. We went to his barn and welded my rear brake rod back together. It put me behind, but I still finished that day on time.

Many of the bikes were well prepared and riders had lots of spare parts and experienced mechanics, but old bikes and old parts will fail. Riding between 250 and 320 miles each day will test the skill of anyone. It is a difficult race physically, emotionally, and mechanically.

The day after the rest in Kansas, my motor seized. I was in trouble. One of the sweep vehicles was a new BMW with a flat side car for hauling ailing bikes. Feeling like the grim reaper, the driver stopped for me. I asked for a few minutes

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at the last minute decided it was not ready. Instead, I took my 1936 Harley VLH, which I have owned for

Ask the craftsmen.

Does the woodworking department do custom projects for anyone besides immediate clients?

Although most of our work comes from current and former clients, we would welcome the opportunity to consider any project that comes our way. With fewer and fewer capable custom woodworking shops around, it's possible we will start getting more work from the general public.

Do you do the design work for custom woodworking projects?

Sometimes we do, and sometimes we get designs submitted by an architect or designer. Most of the homes we do are works in progress, and many of our clients like the flexibility of creating as we go. Often it's a collaboration between client, architect, and Sisler Builders.

Have a question for Sisler Builders? Send it to Ask@SislerBuilders.com and we'll answer it in our next newsletter.



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In the news

Richard Duda, a project manager with Sisler Builders for over 10 years, retired in February. His interest in early 20th century motorcycles and two young grandchildren will keep him busy. We wish him health and happiness in his next chapter in life.

Dustin Jones, son of site supervisor Noi Jones, who has been with Sisler Builder since 1999, has joined the team. With his hard work and team mentality, Dustin is building a great foundation for a productive tenure with Sisler Builders. Noi and Dustin become the second, two-generation family employees at Sisler Builders.

Adam Hart returned to UVM to finish his degree in Forestry. Adam always had a positive attitude no matter what task he was working on. He is a man of great character and will do well in any future endeavors.

Matt Rouleau, a site supervisor with Sisler Builders for over 10 years, has transitioned to project manager. His experience and genuine wholehearted willingness to teach has made him a great mentor to all employees and will aid his continued success.

Coast to coast

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and pumped oil into the cylinder. Fortunately, the piston loosened up and the bike started!

I loved the stretch through the East and was surprised with the Midwest's rolling hills. The West felt stark and barren. One day we rode over Loveland Pass, and at 12,000 feet elevation it was formidable, but everyone running that day made it. The Northwest was great, with huge hay farms and wheat farms and then into the fruit orchards of the upper Northwest.

We ended at the LeMay Museum in Tacoma. The winner was a rider from South Africa, on a 1922 Indian Scout. Twenty five bikers, including Dan and me, finished with perfect scores. Afterwards we loaded our van with the bikes, gear, and dirty laundry and shipped it back to the East Coast, while we flew home.

It was an amazing experience and thankfully I had a few sponsors: Hiedenaur tires, Sprettrum oil, and Andy Rooney, Inc. Sisler Builders was a generous supporter, allowing me to take three weeks off from work. I could not have done it without everyone's help, and of course the patience and support of my wife and family.